

Families struggle in aftermath of deadly Alabama tornado

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A tragic and confused situation follows last Sunday's deadly tornados in Lee County, Alabama. The storm system—which stretched from Louisiana, across Mississippi, Alabama, the Florida panhandle, Georgia and into South Carolina—spawned several tornados. Lee County and neighboring counties in Georgia sustained the most damage.

It now appears that a single EF-4 tornado—and not a series of tornadoes—struck Lee County, with winds as high as 170 miles per hour, cutting a path of destruction half a mile wide and 24 miles long. As of this writing 23 people have died and at least seven remain missing.

The county Sheriff's office reports that the search and rescue effort is “transitioning” into a recovery effort, which is a search for human remains instead of survivors. On Monday night temperatures in the area dropped into the 20s Fahrenheit, making survival a remote possibility for those still missing.

Local and federal officials released the names and ages of the 23 people who have died so far. They include six-year-old A.J. Hernandez, ten-year old Taylor Thornton, and eight-year-old Mykhayla Waldon.

Vicki Braswell, age 69, died when the wall of a mobile home collapsed on her. Braswell was huddled under a mattress inside her double-wide trailer with her daughter and granddaughter. Braswell's son-in-law told the *USA Today*, “we heard it coming but by the time we knew what it was, it hit us. That's when all hell broke loose. It picked us up and dumped us back down 50 feet away.”

While mainstream media attention to the tragedy has already begun tapering off, several GoFundMe pages testify to the agonizing plight of survivors who not only must grieve but also have to put together some semblance of a life.

“My children and I was in a bad storm. One of my sons, Jonathan Bowen was killed by a Tornado that struck Lee County Sunday,” Shamel Hart wrote on a GoFundMe page she set up to raise funds for her suddenly homeless family. “The house we were in went up and the floors disappeared underneath us. One minute felt like hours.

“The Tornado ripped our kids from under us without remorse. When I found my son I was trying to do everything to keep him with me. I tried my hardest to save him with the help of the most heroic people of Beauregard.

“A mother's worst nightmare is to have to bury their child. I never thought I would be burying my child I always thought they would have been burying me.”

Tiffany Wiseman set up a page to support the family of Mykhayla Waldon, explaining that the young girl had “lived 8 years of joy no sorrow, health no pain, love never hate...help perpetuate and energize what Mykhayla Waldon was all about...help her spirit spread the goodness that all children give to us adults.” The rest of Waldon's family, including her father Shane Wilbanks, his girlfriend Tyesha Hart, Arial, 3, and Kamora, 5, were all admitted to the hospital with severe injuries.

“My sister, Megan, and her family were in the middle of it,” Gabby Nichols wrote on the page which she set up to help cover medical expenses. “They are all currently in the hospital. Unfortunately, they do not have health insurance or medical leave from their jobs so they need all the help they can get. There is nothing left of their home and the vehicles are not driveable.

“Eli, my 5-year-old nephew, is at Children's Hospital recovering from a few skull fractures. Megan is at UAB with a broken pelvis and tailbone, punctured lung and possible broken rib. Ben, my brother-in-law, is at

EAMC recovering from surgery for his broken leg and foot. They are all stable, but have a long road of recovery ahead of them. Please donate to help them get through this tragedy.”

While the quick and generous responses to Go Fund Me requests—in some cases raising tens of thousands of dollars within hours—underscore the deep sympathy for victims and survivors, the response of governmental and charitable agencies to the disaster in Lee County has been chaotic at best.

The WSWS asked a Public Information Officer (PIO) at Lee County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) about the forecast of additional inclement weather for this coming weekend, which could include more tornadoes. “We are taking it day by day, hour by hour. Today is Tuesday and we are focused on Tuesday’s problems and taking this one step at a time,” she said.

She could not say how many personnel were on the ground from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or the state of Alabama, although some 50 volunteers were assisting with search and rescue efforts. In response to a question about nearby shelters for people living between the impacted cities of Opelika and Beauregard, the PIO said that shelter locations were listed on the EMA’s website and Facebook page. This reporter found no such information in either place.

A media contact for the American Red Cross likewise could not identify tornado-safe houses for those residing in the rural area between Opelika and Beauregard. She described a “devastating vibe” in Lee County, where everyone she had spoken with had suffered a loss of some kind. The Red Cross had dozens of volunteers in place to date and more were coming in. Their efforts include gathering and distributing supplies, setting up shelters for the displaced, administering medicine, mental health care and “spiritual care.”

The responses from both the County and the Red Cross media contacts revealed an emergency management system that lacks central planning, forethought, coordination and, most obviously, resources.

What would a proper response for Lee County’s tornado aftermath look like?

First, an emergency compensation fund would be established to secure employment, medical and mental

health care, safe housing and other necessities of life for survivors. Destroyed structures, including the vulnerable mobile homes and manufactured homes, would be replaced with buildings engineered to protect human life, not enrich developers or trailer park owners.

The fund would improve communications infrastructure and provide free cell phones or other suitable devices which residents could use to alert authorities of their location and status. A surtax of \$1 billion on the estimated \$4 billion fortune of Birmingham’s Stephens family, which owns EBSCO Industries, equivalent to half the cost of a single B-2 stealth bomber plane, would suffice to initiate a public works program to rebuild homes and critical infrastructure.

However, the stranglehold of the financial oligarchy over society ensures that these essential measures will not be taken and guarantees that such tragedies, which befall Lee County and so many other communities across the United States, will happen again. What is required is the socialist solution: the transformation of society from one in which every aspect of daily life is subjugated to the demands of private profit to one in which scientific planning is used to meet human need.



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